



# ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF CONTEMPORARY ODISHA

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## ABSTRACT

The tribal women of Odisha have been enjoying honourable position in their respective communities, they play important role in socio-cultural, political as well as economic life. The prime hypothesis of this research paper is based on the economic and political status of women of tribal communities of Odisha, who are comparatively much more empowered than the non-tribal women. The status of empowered women in Odishan tribal communities can be said to be fairly high. Commonly the sense of gender equality among the sexes can be observed in most of the tribal societies of Odisha. The main focus of this research paper is on measuring the position of empowered tribal women in economic and political field of their communities. Tribal women of Odisha are not struggling for their socio economic and political empowerment because traditional and customary tribal norms are comparatively more liberal to women in their communities. In the tribal communities of Odisha women have their unique status and much more empowered than non tribal women due to their significant role in social, religious, political, cultural and economic field in their family as well as in village or community level. The women in the tribal society constitute about half of the tribal tribe population. Their role in the tribal society is very important, because the tribal women are work harder and the entire family economy and management depends on them. The tribal women better placed in many respects and more empowered in certain areas.

**KEY WORDS:** Tribal, Women, Society, Odisha, Empowerment, Status.

## INTRODUCTION

There are 62 tribal communities residing in contemporary Odisha. They are scattered to all parts of the Odisha. The major tribes of the state are Kondhs, Gadabas, Koyas, Parajas, Saoras, Bondas, Oraons, Juangs, and Santals. The status of women in a society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Position of women is often described in terms of their level of social, economic, political, educational and cultural field as well as their roles within the family, the community and society. The women of tribal communities of Odisha work more than men and they constitute major work force and help in the enhancement of the social, political and economic prestige of men. In the process of the shifting cultivation the contribution of tribal women is indispensable; most of the agricultural works are exclusively done by the tribal women in addition to their daily household works. That is why the tribal women of Odisha by virtue of their substantial economic contribution are regarded as vital assets to their family. Not only in agricultural field but tribal women also play an important role in each and every household economy. They work in most operations of all sectors of the local economy and for longer hours each day than men. With domestic and reproductive activities associated with household maintenance they also collect and gather free forest goods especially fuel, fodder and water etc. Women in Odishan tribal communities generally operate effectively in most economic and social institutions, participating in local labour activities.

Generally women's status is often described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as their roles within the family, the community and society. Status is not a fixed rigid concept, it changes over time. Women occupy different positions in the social structure as they pass through the life cycle, and the very basis upon which the community ascribes power, privilege and prestige also changes (Bhasin, 2007). The status of women in all types of societies, particularly in patrilineal, is determined by various types of taboos that are attached to the women generally. These taboos can be protective, preventive or productive. It would be scientific error to approach the women of a society with rigid bias to the view that they have either a low or a high status, such dichotomies are generally misleading. There can be so many intermediate statuses; there can be polarity, though it may not be so striking. The status of women in the Indian context cannot be defined simply (Majumdar and Madan, 1956). On this basis the status of women can be measured in any society. In Odisha's tribal communities, the role of tribal women is substantial and crucial. They do not suffer segregation or lower status in their communities. This is reflected in their higher sex-ratio vis-à-vis the general population.

The tribal women folk play a vital role not only in the household sphere but also assume responsibility in supplementing household income which goes a long way in upbringing of children. Although they are mostly illiterate they have the propensity to save for future in terms of cash and/or kind. At least a tribal woman is not spending thrift unlike her male counterpart in her own community. They have started actively participating in village meetings organised by the Panchayatiraj institutions from time to time. It has given them the scope to come out of the cocoon of ignorance and indifference. Their awareness level has enhanced their zeal to organise Self-Help Groups (SHGs), promoting micro-financing network. In this regard, in addition to state governmental efforts, the non-government organizations are frequently motivating, creating awareness

and seeing through its success. Even in a patriarchal social situation, woman's economic and political status in different tribal communities of Odisha is not inferior. There is need to create avenues so that they empower themselves without any exogenous interference. Of course the trend is not uniform throughout; the tribal women in the hill area and cut-off area are less advanced and there is need for special campaign for the enhancement of their awareness level. In a nutshell, the women in tribal communities of Odisha are hard working, sincere and capable of shouldering responsibilities and given appropriate scope they would participate actively and equally as their male counterparts.

## OBJECTIVES

The General objective of this research paper is to understand women empowerment in tribal communities of Odisha. The foremost objective of this research paper is to examine the determinants of women empowerment in tribal communities of Odisha. The objective of the study is also to explore the underlying phenomena of women's empowerment in economic and political life of tribal communities. The approach taken in the present study is also to evaluate to what extent the tribal women enjoying their economic and political status in society.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a theoretical research paper, where primary and secondary data have been used for the analysis. The secondary data were collected from published and unpublished documents of government departments and private agencies. Besides this, secondary data were collected from research reports, research papers, journals and books. The secondary data were ratified during field data collections. Through interview and observation primary data have been collected during field survey. The present research study is based on stratified and multi-stage sampling, which is done at three level i.e. district level, village level and respondent level. Ten tribal blocks were selected using purposive sampling method. A sample of 300 respondents was drawn. The respondents were ignorant of such inquiries, while the interview schedule was designed to get comprehensive information from the respondents. The data collection from the field carried on in the sample villages of ten blocks of Koraput district over thirty days between May to June in 2016. However in order to gain confidence on the sample size and assess the possible difficulties in the field work of the main survey, it was thought necessary to conduct a pilot survey. For this purpose, an interview schedule was designed and interviews of tribal women were taken. During the interviews the respondents were asked some questions on the basis of a structured questionnaire. On the basis of the data collected from interviews this research paper examined the status of empowered women in tribal- dominated villages in the Odisha.

## RESULTS

The respondents interviewed had little or no formal education. Out of 300 tribal women and girls, 240(80%) had not formal education, and the remaining 60 (20%) had education varying from completion of class-I to class-10th, from which it has been observed that girls spend their time on household works help their family and going to get married anyway, so education is not more important for them. Of the 300 respondents enrolled in the study and subsequently interviewed. Among these female respondents of tribal communities, about 55% showed their willingness to assert their position in their society in the face of chal-

allenges to their position posed by their men folks. It was found that 37% among women preferred not to answer the questions, or, to be more specific, were rather shy to answer the questions. During interviews about 55 percent of tribal women replied in affirmative. It was observed during field study that tribal women take pleasure in their voting rights and about 90 percent of women in the study area exercised their right. The study reveal that only 46.7% of the women population are employed, out of which 80 percent of them work as agricultural labour and thus have seasonal employment, 11 percent are self employed (selling forest product) and rest 9 percent are daily wage labor. Their work has been characterised by long working hours and high physical labour. The employment has positive impact upon women autonomy. 60 percent of the working women has high decisive power in comparison to 44 percent of unemployed females. In response to the Question: "Are they satisfied with their traditional rituals or not?" all 300 respondents answered 'yes'. From the responses received, it seems that most of the tribal women feel them equal to men.

## DISCUSSION

The constitution of India is enriched with several provisions for schedule castes and schedule tribes to safeguard and promote their cultural, social, educational, and economic interests in order to bring them in the mainstream of the nation (Rao, 2013). In tribal communities of Odisha, the role of women is substantial and crucial. Generally in tribal communities of contemporary Odisha women are more important than in other social groups, because they work harder and the family economy and overall management depends on them. The tribal women have the freedom to choose their life partner and also have freedom of movement. Unlike other communities, among tribals there are no restrictions on women's participation in the agricultural works. Tribal women of Odisha participate actively in all agricultural activities including ploughing, digging, sowing, manuring, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, preparing the granary, and storing food grains.

Women's participation in the economic and political activities is very important for their personal advancement and their position in the family as well as society. Empowerment is relevant at the individual and collective level, and can be economic, political and socio-cultural. In these broadest sense women empowerment is the expansion of freedom of choice and action both in economic and political sector. It means increasing women's authority and control over the resources of decisions that affects women's life. Women empowerment, equitable access to resources, power and decision making is essential for equality and this critical determinant of economic well being, social status and political power. In Social and family matters, the woman has a definite role. At the social level, in matters of marriage, observation of rituals and arrangement of feasts etc. the husband and wife normally take decision (Padhi, 2011).

## ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND TRIBAL WOMEN

Generally the economic empowerment of women indicates their active participation in economically productive activities; their access to savings and credits and their control over income and other productive assets such as land, business and industries. Work participation is influenced by a combination of number of socio-cultural and economic factors. It is a reality that if women gain economic strength they will ultimately gain power and voice at home, workplace and the community. Economic empowerment of women is highly essential for women's self-confidence, self-image and also their basic needs of survival. Traditionally the tribes lived in mainly forests, hills and undulating inaccessible terrain in plateau areas, rich in natural resources. They have lived as isolated entities for centuries. The economic life of tribal generally based on agriculture. They practice both shifting cultivation on the hill-tops and plough cultivation in low lands. They also gather forest products and go for hunting though it is not a regular practice now with them. Similar fishing is an occasional pursuit. The important source of livelihood of the tribals is agriculture, forest collection, wage-earning, animal-husbandry etc. Living in forest areas, surrounded by hills, the economic life of tribals is quite different from that of the people of the plains. Since early morning both men and women proceed to the field to work in swidden patches, both work till mid-day and then take their lunch and after take some rest again resume their work till afternoon. The main source of their livelihood is shifting cultivation. They do not consume all crops at home and sold some crops in the weekly market for money by which they buy their cloths, ornaments, salt, tobacco and other daily necessities. Not only crops but minor forest produce which they collect also sell in the market and during crisis period they even sale their livestock like poultry, goats etc. As tribal women live in distant villages located amidst hilly forested regions, their life is integrally linked to the forest, which has been their source of food, fodder and wood for fuel. Women in tribal society have been contributing positively to the local economy by participating actively along with men in the pursuit of economic activities to earn livelihood. The tribal women not only participate in all agricultural operations but also they work in all sectors of indigenous cottage industries, tribal arts and production of artifacts. The tribal girls and women are always playing a dominant role in all agricultural operations as well as crafts and forest based economy. The entire family expenditure of a tribal family is controlled and managed by the house-wife in consultation with her husband, grown-up sons and daughters. Both husband and wife go to the weekly markets and fair price shops to dispose their commodities. A Tribal man as husband never shows any disrespect to his wife and seeks her advice in all economic and social matters.

Tribal do not work only for economic benefits, they give importance to other things more in life such as, desire for sustenance, conformity to tradition, recognition for work well done by the group. In tribal society, a wife participates on equal footing with her husband in the struggle of life and is also equal nearly in status. Tribal women works as labour in the field, construction works and supplements the income of the family by working as a casual labour during off season and also participates in agricultural operations in their fields. Collection of minor forest produce also plays an important part in the tribal economy. Its collection and marketing is a major source of livelihood for most Tribal families.

In Odishan tribal society typically a women is an invisible asset through overtly her efforts are not property valued in the society. Her contribution to the family's income is on way less than man folk. In spite of several legal safeguards and the implementation of various development programs, tribal women continue to suffer from oppression, exploitation, and discrimination in different walks of life (Chaudhary, 2010). The contribution of tribal women to her family's income is quite significant though the nature of work between her and husband may differ. Despite their major contribution the tribal woman in Odisha are not viewed as being within the production system or being the economic contributor to their families. Tribal women's important economic role does not give them a very high position in the society at par with man. They cannot fully inherit property and they have little religious duties and they cannot hold any public office. Despite these issues it has been observed that the tribal women possess greater economic independence and freedom of movement than non-tribal women as their counterparts.

## POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT AND TRIBAL WOMEN

Of all empowerment with their importance, political empowerment may be considered more vital one. The empowerment is particularly meant for participating in political decision-making process. And the process normally affects society. Political empowerment of women refers to the equitable representation of women in decision making structures, both formal and informal and their voice in the formulation of policies affecting their as well as society. Political empowerment for women is regarded as a key driver for economic and social empowerment. Economic empowerment can provide the clout for women to be empowered politically. Political empowerment allows women to take control of the policies that will prove beneficial for their economic empowerment. The tribal society is having a well established system of traditional, political organization. The village matters mostly decided in the meeting at the village councils. These councils were purely of a democratic nature and such meetings are also attended by women although they are not permitted to take part in deliberations except in cases concerning them. Furthermore, the political system of the tribals is purely patriarchal in spirit and form. Among the tribals, the patriarchal office is hereditary in the family on the basis of personal fitness for the responsibilities. Tribal women are less educated comparatively and gender equality among tribal group is a complex phenomenon (Mitra, 2008).

The presence and participation of tribal women in Panchayatiraj institutions have brought about a formidable change in their position within the tribal social organisation as well as in the overall hierarchical structure of the Indian society leading towards their empowerment. This has been the result of the enactment of Panchayatiraj Act (1992), which provided for one third representations to women in Panchayat including those belonging to the scheduled tribes. The extension of the Act to the scheduled Areas (1996) has further increased the representation of tribals as well as woman giving those more powers. The history of tribal suggests their continuous exploitation and marginalization. The tribal people remained at the periphery of the wider political system and kept their women marginal to their own tribal polity. The Panchayatiraj institutions have been provided a few number of tribal women, however, for the majority of tribal women in the study area seems to have had negligible impact on the lives. As a result of which the majority of Tribal women even do not understand the power of Pali and Grama Sabha and do not take these useful for them.

## CONCLUSION

Women in tribal communities of Odisha play very significant role in the co-management of their natural, social, economic resources and agricultural progress. A tribal woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic and village political structure of her community or society, she is found to be exercising a relatively free and firm hand in all aspects related to her social life unlike in non-tribal societies. Most of the tribal communities of Odisha are patriarchal where women have a freedom and self expression. They can only be understood on their own terms. With the onset of development programmes economic charges are taking place but tribal women remain traditional in their dress, language, tools and resources, because they grow food crops rather than cash crops. Generally in a tribal family husband plays the head role, the wife also plays a large part in its control and overall management of daily family affairs. Again, there are many facts which indicate a low status for the tribal women in Odisha. For example, she does not have property rights except in a matrilineal society which is a small proportion of the tribal population. She is paid less as wages than her male counterpart for the same work. Several taboos discriminating against tribal women exist in certain tribal groups implying impurity and low status. The tribal women cannot hold the office of a priest. There are taboos related to menstruation. As a result of which tribal women suffer both by tribal customary practices as well as the state machines and they continue to live with the various dis-

criminations. A tribal woman always busy not only in domestic works but also she plays a vital role in family income both directly and indirectly by gathering of forest products, cow dung and firewood etc. Divorce is very common in many tribal communities of Odisha. A married tribal woman may say before parents and village level community Panchayat that she does not want to stay with her husband and then she can leave her husband's house. When she remarries, bride-price given by the first husband is demanded from the second one. Tribal women in Odisha have more say in family decisions than their non-tribal counterparts, they also share more responsibilities. Their latent leadership quality has been manifested in the assumption of roles under Panchayatiraj institutions and they have become reasonably vocal to express their own ideas for betterment of their community as a whole.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

To increase the female participation at the community level and to give more decision making power it is needed to understand the existing traditional pattern of tribal community in more details which would help in formulation of more effective developmental policies and it will also help to bring out the lacunae lying within present policies. With the growing participation of women both the union and state government should give emphasis on women entrepreneurship through a mechanism to identify the suitable projects and budding entrepreneur keeping in view the local resources. In order to boost the confidence of women folk it is recommended to create awareness campaign through Government/ N.G.O efforts. Women-related trades would require women's capacity building through demonstration and training in each village. These women will gradually develop their entrepreneurial skill, provided proper facilities are made available. Tribal women should be provided with opportunities for leadership training.

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